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Topic: The Condition of England Novels: An Ecofeminist Approach

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Synopsis

The proposed thesis aims to study the Condition of England novels from an ecofeminist perspective to show that some of the Condition of England novels seemed to present many of the assertions made by the ecofeminist critics. Victorian England is known for the evolution of industrial society, the rise of great towns and cities, emergence of England as a world economic power with wealth from industrial and imperial projects. But in that period England also witnessed the exploitation of the natural and physical environment, the exploitation of the poor people, above all the exploitation of the ecology which is considered as a living whole. The ecology was disbalanced and fragmented by the changing situations. These were all the by-products of the so called progressive industrial projects and successful economic plans like laissez faire. The growing wealth lay in the hands of the upper classes. The conditions of the poor people degenerated. They lived in abject poverty. Pollution and the bad sanitary conditions increased the rate of mortality. Ecological balance and the condition of life were badly affected and the possibility of a healthy life for future generation became uncertain. The anguish and fatality of that period had a profound influence on the authors of that period. They wanted to create concern among the reading public out of which emerged a new kind of novel called Condition of England novel also known as industrial novel or social problem novel. The Condition of England novels wanted to highlight human, social and ecological cost of aggressive urbanization and industrialization. In the book named *Chartism* (1839), Carlyle wrote about "condition of England question" (1) to highlight the same problems as the Condition of England novels did. Major Condition of England novels are Frances Trollope's *Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* (1840) *Bleak House (*1853) and *Hard Times* (1854) by Charles Dickens. *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855) by Elizabeth Gaskell, *Sybil or The Two Nations* (1845) by Benjamin Disraeli and Charles Kingsley's *Yeast* (1848) and *Alton Locke* (1850). The proposed thesis will focus on these Condition of England novels.

The Condition of England novels showed how the life and the future possibility of life were endangered at that time disbalancing and disharmonizing all the ecological balance. *Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong, The Factory Boy* was the first industrial novel published in 1840. Trollope's focus was on the plight of child labourers. The novel, which dealt with the labour conditions in Manchester, exposed the abuses of child employment in early Victorian England. Trollope who described the vile living conditions of the working class, preceded Benjamin Disraeli, Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Dickens in the description of slum housing and factory conditions. In *Hard Times* mechanization, sterility and hardcore utilitarianism dominated the environment of the novel. Machine in *Hard Times* can be seen as representing dominating

male power. Existence seems to be dominated by male-controlled technology, science and industry. In *Hard times* one can identify sterility in nature with those of mind, relationship and education. The work is intricate because Dickens being a man, consistently presented Sissy as a symbol of life-enhancing forces. By giving Sissy a prosperous happy married life Dickens ultimately made victorious life over machine, emotion over mechanization, fertility over sterility. Though there were no radical changes in the environmental condition, the ecology of Coketown had undergone a change due to her positive influence. In *Bleak House* the fog made the environment gloomy and suffocating. The waterside pollution, gas, smoke from chimneys, and soot made the city's environment polluted and unhealthy. The colours predominant in the novel are grey and black. Fog became one of the central symbols of life-destroying forces. Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* presented a stark contrast between emerging industrial north which became the popular face of England and the agrarian economy of the southern countryside seen through the eyes of a sensitive woman named Margaret Hale. Margaret wanted the factory system to be more humane. She wanted to recreate the balance in the ecology of that place. *Mary Barton* also gave some realistic pictures of slum life and filthy environmental features including dirt, smoke and wastewater. *Mary Barton* reflected the condition of physical environment, characterized by what Natalka Freeland called "transgressively graphic accounts of filth and waste" (799). She gave description of Manchester's rain which had only a disheartening and gloomy effect making the street dirty. Gaskell showed how people went from factories to the nearby countryside for some fresh air. It was poverty and their compulsion to live in that slum-environment which affected them negatively. Disraeli's *Sybil* was set in a rural town called Marney and he referred to the nearby manufacturing town where the sky was not clear, the deer seemed to have bathed in ink. A deeper ecological mode of analysis is reflected in his description of a contaminated environment, in his reference to soil erosion. Benjamin Disraeli in *Sybil* gave detailed description of filthy slums, poor sanitary and working conditions, high infant mortality rate and short life expectancy. *Sybil* was not just a political work; it had ecological implications. He proposed to take New Toryism to establish mutual harmony in the contemporary hierarchy. New Toryism proposed cohesive social ecological existence without the oppression, and an alliance between old aristocracy and the working class to revive society with privileged, prosperous people. John Parham referred to M.Smith who suggested that *Sybil* is largely based on the idea of society as a complete organism (*For You*). So in *Sybil* ecofeminist perspective can be used as a critical tool because it also proposes such cohesive social ecological existence. Charles Kingsley's *Yeast* was the first novel which showed the deplorable sanitary condition and disease in rural England. Open sewer drainage polluted the environment of the countryside. There was no properly cleaned water supply in the countrysides which was spreading diseases. In *Alton Locke* Charles Kingsley wrote about a slum life of misery and poverty where many dreams were shattered. Alton Locke who dreamt to be a poet died an unfortunate death. He saw a family in his neighbourhood where two sisters turned to prostitution to survive in the extreme poverty.

Critics have regarded Condition of England novels primarily as polemical, giving emphasis to the social, political and moral issues. A few critics have used ecocritical perspectives for analyzing these novels especially the novels of Charles Dickens. Some critics saw these authors from social perspectives, some have found feminist tendencies in writers like Frances Trollope and Elizabeth Gaskell and some have general ecocritical approach towards the authors and their novels but they did not use ecofeminist perspective, which is an important aspect of

ecocriticism, to look at these novels. There are other strands of thinking in ecocriticism like deep ecology, environmentalism and social ecology. Victorian period cannot be seen through deep ecological perspective because deep ecology romanticized nature, it talks about ideal nature. Deep ecology asserts that anthropocentrism that is human centredness is the root of all kinds of domination and exploitation of nature. Environmentalism prescribes new technologies to save environment like preserving the coal by using alternatives like nuclear power. But they do not consider that there will be huge damage of living beings and environment if a nuclear explosion happens. Social ecology believes that ecological problems arise from deep-seated social problems. Social ecology aims to reintegrate human communities with ecocommunities, producing a rational and ecological society based on mutual respect for the interrelationship of all aspects of life.

The Condition of England novel's subject matter and prevailing attitudes revealed many of ecofeminist theory's most regularly avowed tenets. Vandana Shiva has discussed about the concept of life-enhancing forces and life-destroying forces in her book named *Staying Alive.* Ecofeminism presented both good practices and bad practices and then differentiated them, ultimately celebrating the good practices. The Condition of England novels also celebrated the life-enhancing forces at least through sustainable relationships, with the victory of emotions, and mutual harmony. The proposed thesis intends to examine how far the Condition of England novels presented the life-enhancing forces in contrast to the life-destroying forces. Thus it can be seen that through ecofeminism many important aspects of these Condition of England novels can be explored which prominent ecocritics have not discussed consistently. So with the help of ecofeminism as a critical tool the thesis will try to explore the presentation, analysis and critique of the life-enhancing forces and life-destroying forces in these Condition of England novels.

The tentative chapter divisions will include an introduction describing the scope and need of critique of ecological condition in nineteenth century England. The first chapter will be used to write about the theoretical framework of ecocriticism and ecofeminism. The second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth chapters will comprise the discussion of the Condition of England novels of authors Frances Trollope, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Benjamin Disraeli and Charles Kingsley respectively. The conclusion will be about the findings of this research.

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